Positioning public relations as an academic discipline in Australia

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Academic public relations in Australia appears to be entering a new phase in its relatively short history. The early model in which tertiary courses were confined to teaching-focussed institutions and conducted largely by teacher-practitioners is being supplanted by one in which the discipline is now offered in most Australian universities, is increasingly embracing research, and is being taught by staff following more traditional academic career paths. Despite the formal association with the communication discipline through ANZCA, public relations academics have increasingly asserted the independence of their discipline and in reality have very little dialogue with other strands of the communication discipline. These developments call into question the most appropriate knowledge base for public relations as an academic discipline in Australia and its proper relation to the profession (and the PRIA as the professional body).

One danger associated with the assertion of disciplinary independence lies in the risk of excessive reliance on a relatively narrow body of work emanating from the more established US public relations academy, in the process ignoring much richer work in surrounding disciplines such as social theory, rhetoric, organisational communication, and business and society. The emphasis on disciplinary demarcation also seems curious during a time of growing ‘interdisciplinarity’ in the humanities and the social sciences. This paper critically reviews the construction of public relations as an academic discipline in Australia, drawing on some of the literature on academic disciplinarity to propose a repositioning of the discipline, one that is less focussed on asserting difference than on finding connections with other bodies of knowledge while maintaining close links with professional practice.

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Academic public relations in Australia appears to be entering a new phase in its relatively short history. The early model in which tertiary courses were confined to teaching-focussed institutions and conducted largely by teacher-practitioners is being supplanted by one in which public relations is now offered in most Australian universities, is increasingly embracing research, and is being taught by staff following more traditional academic career paths. Despite the formal association with the communication discipline through ANZCA, public relations academics have increasingly asserted the independence of their discipline and in reality have very little dialogue with other strands of the communication discipline, nor with other management disciplines. These developments call into question the most appropriate knowledge base for public relations as an academic discipline in Australia and its proper relation to the profession (and the PRIA as the professional body). In this paper we will interrogate the notion of public relations as an academic discipline in Australia, first by considering the notion of 'disciplinarity' itself, and second by focussing on some factors specific to the historical construction of the public relations discipline in Australia. Finally, we will offer some suggestions about the future of academic public relations in Australia – suggestions which are made in the spirit of opening up a necessary debate rather than to set out a particular agenda.

Public relations and academic 'disciplinarity'

While the acceptance of public relations into the academy is part of a larger, and largely successful, process of 'professionalization', the status of academic public relations remains problematic. As McKie puts it, 'public relations still struggles to gain the academic recognition its burgeoning undergraduate and postgraduate courses merit' (1997, p. 93). McKie identifies as a cause of this lack of prestige the failure of academic public relations to make connections with major new ideas in established social science and humanities disciplines – a failure to which we will return later in this paper. However, a more fundamental cause may lie in the ambiguous *disciplinary* status of public relations, particularly when considered as one of a number of relatively new 'business disciplines'. In discussing public relations as a business discipline, we are aware that the subject is taught in Australia, as elsewhere, in business, liberal arts, social science and communication faculties as well as through cross-faculty arrangements (Turnbull, 2003). Our point is, however, that whatever its institutional alignment, public relations has been constructed – at least in the mainstream US model that has also proved dominant in Australia – as a business discipline, that is as a body of theory and pedagogical practice whose primary rationale is to serve (whether by developing new practitioners, or providing research or other professional services of utility to existing practitioners) a business practice that lies outside the academy and is historically anterior to its incorporation as a university subject. A discussion of the disciplinary status of public relations, then, must begin with some consideration of that of the 'business disciplines' themselves.

An impressive and expanding literature has emerged to challenge the often tacit intellectual and institutional assumptions that support the division of knowledge into discrete academic disciplines. Much of this literature is critical in orientation, seeking to 'de-essentialise' by disclosing the material and political bases for the construction of a particular academic discipline as 'a historically contingent, adventitious

coherence of dispersed elements' (Messer-Davidow, Shumway & Sylvan, 1993, p. 2). While even the 'hard' science disciplines such as physics have proved not entirely immune from such a project, the critique of disciplinarity finds more ready grist to its mill in the humanities and the social sciences. As Fuller puts it, comparing science and the social sciences, 'disciplinary histories of the social sciences more easily show the rhetorical seams of appearing to "represent" the world without substantially "intervening" in it' (1993, p. 125). Fuller is speaking about relatively established social science disciplines such as economics and psychology, but his point is even more relevant to the applied social sciences we refer to as the 'business disciplines'. Disciplines such as management, marketing, and (we would argue) public relations provide yet another dimension to the debate about disciplinarity as each of these domains has coherence primarily, both historically and rhetorically, not as an academic or intellectual pursuit but as a business practice. In other words, the whole *raison d'etre* of these disciplines, and the source of whatever academic prestige and popularity they may have, arises from the fact that they *do* intervene in the world rather than merely pretend to describe it objectively.

The business disciplines are subject to a number of often conflicting rhetorical and ethical imperatives. On the one hand, these disciplines derive their legitimacy from their ability to produce trained technicians who can take their place generally in quite specific roles in the business workplace – for example, as junior managers within specialised sections of corporations devoted to human resources or marketing. Indeed the degree of homology between the internal structures of university business faculties and the typical modern corporation, with schools or departments closely echoing the nomenclature of major corporate divisions, is significant evidence for the degree to which the modern university has become entwined with the corporate power structure. At the same time, academic practitioners of the business disciplines must pay at least lip service to specifically academic traditions and rituals such as intellectual independence (especially from vested interests), collegial governance, intellectually grounded rather than purely vocational pedagogy, and a commitment to generating knowledge that is significant according to disciplinary protocols rather than necessarily useful to particular constituencies.

The attempt of the business disciplines to be simultaneously instrumental and 'academic' has always been problematic, and perhaps no more so than when seen from the perspective of disciplinarity. It could be argued that the business disciplines are not real academic disciplines at all but merely specific (and often quite pragmatic, indeed even cynical) applications of pre- and co-existing disciplines that have a more robust intellectual integrity. Thus management, for example, could be seen as largely parasitic on sociology, and perhaps aspects of philosophy and psychology. But it would also be simplistic to say that an instrumental focus necessarily undermines disciplinary status. Indeed the relationship can be quite the opposite. What Fuller calls 'the epistemic superiority of the natural sciences', for example, rests largely on the visibility of 'astronauts going up in space or nuclear bombs being exploded' (p. 131). Even the humanities have until recently appealed to their instrumental value by arguing that 'knowledge of rhetoric and classical liberal arts was … the key to worldly power' (Fuller, 1993, p. 130). What seems to be most significant for the business disciplines is the degree of contentiousness about the particular outcomes to which they are oriented – activities which might be construed as primarily serving the interests of powerful, perhaps even obnoxious, private interests rather than fairly

uncontroversial human needs such as those served by medicine or aeronautical engineering.

The implication of the burgeoning business academy in the failings of 'late' or 'consumerist' capitalism make it a fairly obvious target for radical critique, particularly insomuch as this affiliation is perceived as a betrayal of the university's traditional mission. A recent example of such a critique (Ehrensal, 2001) is tellingly titled 'Training Capitalism's Foot Soldiers'. Perhaps a more interesting question, however, is the stance of individuals – or whole disciplines – within this probably ineluctable business-academic juggernaut. As Ehrensal puts it, 'we can distinguish between being a professor of management and being a social scientist studying management behavior' (p. 113). This formulation may be helpful in considering the disciplinary status of public relations. Academic public relations has been widely criticised for its failure to come to terms with new intellectual currents emanating from the social sciences, the humanities, and even the hard sciences (Mackey, 2001; Leitch & Neilson, 1997; McKie, 1997). Conversely, public relations theory and scholarship seem to have had little impact outside the narrowly defined discipline, even in such a closely related field as communication (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 645). Yet rather than seeing these failings simply as reflecting the limitations of individual scholars or institutions, we might ask whether they are to some extent the inevitable product of a particular *stance* inseparable from the mainstream view of public relations as an academic discipline. It is difficult to see how, for example, public relations academics can profoundly embrace the radical critiques of the Frankfurt School and other strands of 'critical theory' while the underlying rationale of the discipline remains to legitimate, and serve the interests of, a particular business practice.

Yet if public relations academics were to redefine themselves as disinterested 'social scientists studying public relations', what disciplinary integrity would be left to public relations as distinct from, say, sociology or even cultural studies? The anxiety lurking behind this question may account for what to an outsider must seem the quite extraordinary proliferation of 'disciplines' (or sub-disciplines) concerned with what we might broadly term 'business communication'. Zorn (2002) draws attention to the historically constructed, and largely unhelpful, distinctions between public relations, organisational communication, and business communication (narrowly conceived as concerned primarily with skills) itself. But we could also point to many other established or emerging disciplines that claim to be describing much the same territory, particularly within marketing (marketing communication, internal marketing, social marketing), management (management communication, organisational theory), and the emerging field of 'business and society' (issues management). What seems to differentiate these so-called disciplines is not so much the object of study – they all claim to be dealing with the interaction, particularly the communicative interaction, between organisations and their social environment – but the particular intellectual traditions and professional affiliations they bring to bear on this largely shared object of study. We could say in general, for example, that critical theory has been much more influential in the organisational communication and business and society literatures, than it has in the public relations or marketing literatures. In turn, such distinctions seem to depend on the professional affiliation of the discipline – for example, the close link of both public relations and marketing to

the business workplace seems to largely preclude the critical gaze on the business reality that is their object of study.

In a sense it has been a tactical necessity for public relations to defend its boundaries, particularly against 'the imperialistic ambitions of expansive fields, such as marketing' (McKie & Hunt, 1999, p. 55). Yet it is striking how much of the disciplinary wars within the academy have been conducted in terms that take their point of reference from business practice rather than from the intellectual coherence of the academic discipline itself. If, as the PRIA has long argued, public relations is a *practice* quite distinct from marketing and journalism, then there must be an academic *discipline* of public relations distinct from the disciplines of marketing and journalism. The problem with this line of argument is that the logic of demarcation does not necessarily furnish the basis for a set of intellectually coherent academic activities, at least beyond the undergraduate program. It may be clear that public relations undergraduates, as trainee practitioners, require a specific, largely practice-based curriculum, quite distinct from that appropriate for undergraduates in journalism or marketing (eg. Anderson, 1999). Beyond the undergraduate curriculum, however, the emphasis on disciplinary demarcation may well be counterproductive, especially in producing the kind of intellectual capital required to underpin doctoral programs and substantial research and scholarship, particularly that likely to get recognition beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries.

Finally, it is worth noting that the 'demarcation disputes' within the business communication disciplines contradict the 'move towards an increasing interdisciplinarity' (McKie & Hunt, 1999, p. 43) in the humanities, the social sciences, and even to some extent in the hard sciences. In literary studies, for example, an openness to the insights and methods of disciplines as diverse as philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, history and anthropology has become something of a badge of honour. The new interdisciplinarity in the humanities and social sciences is also apparent in the increasing number of 'thematic' conferences that deliberately aim to promote interaction between scholars from different disciplinary and theoretical backgrounds. The recent 'Sites of Cosmopolitanism' conference at Griffith University, for example, sought to engage 'theorists and practitioners in architecture and urban planning, design, art, fashion, literary studies, aesthetics, political philosophy, history and social theory' (*Sites of cosmopolitanism*, 2005). By contrast, such ostensibly interdisciplinary conferences as those of ANZCA or ICA are broken down into fairly rigid 'sections' – devoted to public relations, journalism, political communication and so on – that arguably simply reinforce the distinctions between communication disciplines. Moreover, many of the interdisciplinary projects located in 'new humanities' fields such as cultural studies concern the broad area of 'promotional culture' (eg. Turner, Bonner & Marshall, 2000) that we might expect would also engage public relations scholars. However, the prevailing, narrowly practice-based, definition of the public relations discipline seems largely to preclude such interdisciplinary engagement.

Academic public relations in Australia

Public relations in Australia has an interesting pre-academic history, discussed in a chapter of Johnston and Zawawi's (2004) textbook. However, its academic history – dating from the first tertiary degree courses in 1969 – is closely bound up with the

broader history of the communication discipline. The latter history has itself been the subject of recent analysis (Maras, 2004), in turn contributing to a larger debate about the coherence and future of communication as an academic discipline or field (Putnis & Axford, 2002; Bonney, 2001; Simpson & Zorn, 2004; Galvin, 2002). Much of this debate coheres around 'the two paradigms argument' (Maras, 2004, p. 20), which has been variously formulated as a clash between North American and British/European traditions of communication scholarship, 'a general study of culture and cultural production' versus 'an a-historical and a-social account of the process of communication' (p. 19), and 'a local tension between developing theory and developing communication skills and strategies more relevant to industries and organisations' (p. 21).

Of course such debates never take place entirely within a disinterested intellectual realm. Maras (2004. pp. 22-26) outlines the inextricable links between the development of the communication discipline and the three major waves of changes to Australian higher education since 1970 that saw the growth of communication as a distinct offering within the expanding college sector, followed by its infiltration of older universities as the post-1989 unitary system meant that institutions across the sector were responding to similar imperatives. This institutional history in turn is a response to a changing economy, and a changing conceptualisation of the relationship between the economy and the academy, one aspect of which is what Maras calls an 'increased focus on utility in the context of an arts and humanities education' (p. 26). Outside the humanities, we could equally point to the spectacular growth of business faculties, and the attempt to re-badge communication as part of the 'creative industries' (Galvin, 2002), as part of the same trend.

The growth of public relations within the academy is clearly part of this move to an 'instrumental' view of higher education. Turnbull (2003) suggests that the emergence of public relations courses in every Australian state is closely linked to the PRIA's national accreditation system and the demands of the industry for employees with specific public relations, as opposed to more generic communication, skills and knowledge. Galvin (2002) presents a powerful case that 'communication', like those other almost ubiquitous rubrics 'information' and 'culture', is in danger of becoming a victim of its own success – the widespread acceptance of communication as a civic and educational good (implied for example in the nearly universal inclusion of 'communication skills' as a desirable generic skill of all university students, whatever their specific disciplinary foundation), and the growth of applied communication sub-fields that are linked to specific employment outcomes, threaten to vitiate the intellectual coherence of the field as a whole. Public relations is perhaps the most outstanding example of the applied communication sub-field that threatens to cannibalise the disciplinary parent. This trajectory is clearly evident in the growth of public relations as an undergraduate major, increasingly divorced from any residual link with communication itself.

The success of public relations in the academy, however, has really been success in attracting students – and in particular undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students who see university qualifications in public relations as a means to an attractive and relatively assured employment outcome. Such success does not necessarily translate into success against the criteria most often associated with individual and disciplinary prestige within the academy – active postgraduate research

programs, particularly at the honours and doctoral levels; nationally competitive research grants; publication in prestigious international journals; recognition of significant disciplinary research and scholarship by scholars beyond the discipline itself; and proportion of PhD-qualified teaching staff. Although it is difficult to locate precise statistics given the varying nomenclature of organisational units that house public relations programs, it would be uncontroversial to say that against virtually all these criteria, the performance of academic public relations in Australia has been quite poor. As in the United States, public relations programs in Australia are still largely seen as 'cash cows' and teaching staff 'screened for technical skills but …often not expected to be researchers and theorists' (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 646).

In seeking to boost its disciplinary prestige, and in particular in finding a credible research agenda, Australian academic public relations faces a series of choices, many of which correspond to the 'two paradigms' view of the communication discipline: between an industry/skills and a critical focus; between empiricism (largely drawn from US social psychology) and the European critical/philosophical tradition; between reinforcing disciplinary boundaries and embracing interdisciplinary opportunities. These choices are by no means mutually exclusive, and one desideratum for academic public relations in Australia is surely a tolerant and vibrant intellectual eclecticism, comparable to that of, say, economics or sociology. Our contention, however, is that these choices have been largely constrained by the obeisance that the Australian public relations academy has paid, at least until recently, to the US public relations academy with its far more established textbook, journal and institutional traditions. The historical reliance on the US example is hardly surprising given the lack of alternative models, and there are recent signs that Australian and New Zealand scholars may be leading the way in pointing to the limitations of the 'mainstream' US academic tradition. For example, Mackey (2001) devotes much of his PhD dissertation to a detailed critique of a discipline and industry 'dominated by a corporatist ideology stemming from a particular US business tradition' (p. i). New Zealand-based scholars Leitch and Neilson (1997) offer a powerful critique of the sometimes staggering failure to consider 'the concept of power' (p.18) in much of the highly influential theorising emanating from the US academy. Our particular interest, however, is not so much in critiquing dominant paradigms such as the 'symmetrical' model as in suggesting ways forward for academic public relations in Australia as it enters a crucial phase in its history. The way forward may involve not just liberation from the dead hand of the US academy, but also from the stifling influence of a narrowly conceived disciplinarity itself.

Redefining disciplinarity

To this point we have attempted to problematise the notion of an academic discipline that is so heavily dependent for its overall legitimacy, as well as often for its specific ideological and theoretical stance, on its relationship with a particular business practice (or sets of practice). However, our intention is certainly not to suggest some kind of absolute break between industry and academy – least of all in this, the academic forum of the industry association. Indeed, in considering a possible future for academic public relations in Australia, we need first to consider two issues that concern the *relationship* between industry and academy in defining a more or less precise concept that we can call 'public relations' – the boundaries of public relations knowledge and the specific forces driving demand for this knowledge.

First, it needs to be noted that public relations is at a crucial point in explicating its central tasks and focus on the path to professionalism. Within Wilenski's (1964) framework, it could be argued that public relations is still debating its tasks and boundaries as a practice, a situation that impedes discussion within the academic community about defining the boundaries of the knowledge base. A review of the definitions of public relations – from using communication to build and hold goodwill through to social and political engineering – indicates an identity crisis within the profession 'largely of its own making' (Hutton, 1999, p. 199). The literature identifies at least six models – persuasion, advocacy, public information, cause-related public relations, image/reputation management, and relationship management – of which relationship management (Broom, Casey & Ritchie, 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 2001; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Huang, 2001) appears to be emerging as the dominant paradigm (Hutton, 1999).

The almost obsessive interest of public relations academia in defining the nature of the activity, however, is perhaps itself a manifestation of a deep-seated difference between academics and practitioners, particularly as it relates to our second point – the knowledge demands of public relations. In an early public relations text, Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested that 'public relations probably will not become a full-fledged profession until its practitioners approach their work as intellectuals' (p. 77). Solid theory and research are often seen as integral to the professionalization of the field (Pieczka and L'Etang, 2001). However, such views, which see professionalism as essentially a matter of generating and applying expert knowledge, may reflect an academic perspective quite different from that of practitioners, clients and professional associations. Van Ruler (2004) discusses the status of public relations in terms of four major models of professionalism in the literature: knowledge, status, competition and personality models. The relationship between these models and the role of theory in supporting professionalism is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Professionalism models and role of theory

Rational intelligence

Knowledge model Generates pre-defined body of knowledge	Competition model Generates broad reservoir of new knowledge
Status model Generates status and autonomy	Personality model Mentality (attitude) is more important

Emotional intelligence

Source: Adapted from van Ruler, 2004

Van Ruler identifies a marked difference in the perspectives from which public relations practitioners and academics approach the role of the knowledge or theory underpinning practice. While academics are focused on the body of knowledge that underpins a discipline, practitioners value traits such as their personal ability to deal with clients (personality model), and the status and value conferred on the type of work they engage in by clients, professional associations and sense of self as a professional (status model). While Van Ruler (2004) is primarily concerned to answer

the question 'Why seem practitioners so reluctant to adopt scholarly work?' (p. 2), we might apply his notion of conflicting models of professionalism to the converse issue of 'Why does so much academic theory building and disciplinary demarcation make such little connection with the real world of the public relations practitioner?' While Van Ruler ultimately calls for a hybrid model of professionalism in which 'scholars and practitioners are willing to accept each other's ideas about professionalization' (p. 15), one could also point to the largely quixotic nature of the attempt of academic public relations to develop knowledge that attempts to explicate and guide practice, but is in fact of very limited interest to practitioners.

These considerations form a prelude to some brief remarks grouped under four suggested paths forward that we hope might help to open up a debate on the future for academic public relations in Australia.

1. Moving beyond a rhetorical defence of public relations ('PR for PR')

Much academic energy is still spent on legitimising public relations as a valid, and even socially necessary, activity. This rhetoric is essentially defensive, counteracting still widely held views about the industry (eg. Van Ruler, 2004, p.13) that indicate that most of this 'PR for PR' has been spectacularly unsuccessful. We can see this tendency in such frequently cited academic work as what we might call Grunig and Hunt's (1984) 'idealised history' of the activity with its ameliorative progression from 'press agentry' to 'two-way symmetrical' models, as well as in more recent attempts to present public relations as 'the corporate conscience' conducted by 'in-house activists' (eg. Holtzhausen, 2000). Some of this activity parallels the efforts of professional associations such as the PRIA in their 'status' approach to professionalization. However, from a purely academic point of view, the rhetorical defence of public relations can be seen as dangerously conflating the normative and the descriptive – are these terms meant to be describe what practitioners actually do or some ideal that would only apply to the activities of a tiny minority? A more fundamental question is why academics, whose primary allegiance must be to the disinterested generation of knowledge, feel constrained to defend particular business practices in the first place. A more mature approach would be to acknowledge that public relations, both historically and in the contemporary context, has been used to describe a large number of activities and applications of various ethical hue, and in the workplace is likely to have many crossovers with related activities such as marketing, advertising, or human resource management. The focus of education and research, then, becomes less on differentiating and defending the field than on developing skills likely to be useful in a wide range of workplace contexts and in enquiring into aspects of the broad field of public relations (ie, the nature of the communicative interaction between organisations and their publics, which might be approached from many perspectives – historical, rhetorical, sociological, media etc).

2. Rediscovering the contextual

The US public relations academy (reproducing the empiricist sociological and psychological traditions on which it largely relies) is notorious for generating de-historicised and de-politicised models to describe phenomena such as 'activist' publics or 'organisation-public relationships'. Most of all, this tradition seems to ignore the particular historical context in which public relations itself emerged as a distinct activity, and the ways in which it has changed to adapt to changes in the nature of the capitalist economy, or been adapted to different national and organisational cultures. In particular, the Australian public relations academy needs to

focus on specifically local factors, which include a history, and business and government systems, quite different from those of the US archetype. More generally, public relations as a whole needs to acknowledge that concepts such as 'activist publics' are only intelligible historically – our current understanding of the term, for example, largely derives from 1960s consumer and political activism, which arguably has been radically challenged by developments such as 'online activism' and the growth of 'identity politics'. This reorientation also suggests new teaching and research agendas that might explore, for example, the history of environmental activism (and institutional response) or the growth of public relations within Australian government departments.

3. Embracing the interdisciplinary

As discussed in the first section of the paper, the growth of micro-disciplines concerned with the broad area of business communication has more to do with personal careerism, institutional rivalry and an attempt to cater for the dynamic business education market than it does with serious intellectual debate. If the people teaching these 'new disciplines' are to be credible as academics and intellectuals, rather than merely as practitioner-teachers who remain primarily aligned to their particular professional activity or association, they must embrace a culture of research and scholarship that is recognised not merely by a small academic discipline (or sub-discipline) but by a broader academic and intellectual community. For public relations in Australia, this will mean engaging not merely with other business communication sub-disciplines, but also with established disciplines in the social sciences and humanities such as sociology, organisational studies, anthropology, political science, media studies, linguistics and rhetoric. In fact, given the ambitious terms in which the public relations discipline is sometimes defined, it seems extraordinary that this interdisciplinary engagement has been so limited (McKie, 1997). Getz (2002) canvasses a range of disciplines relevant to public relations practice: political science (interest group theory); economics (collective action theory, public choice theory, transaction cost theory, game theory); sociology (resource dependence, institutional theory); and management (agency theory, behavioural theory of the firm, business strategy theory, population ecology theory). However, her conclusion is that while these theories have the potential to underpin understanding, practice remains primarily descriptive and atheoretical (Getz, 2002). Our argument, however, is that this orientation of practice should not constrain the intellectual explorations of the academy. A more mature public relations discipline would not shy away from engaging critical, even radically anti-business, traditions in the social sciences nor from acknowledging highly sophisticated literatures and traditions that, like it, deal with the nature of the social, and the ethics and process of communication in a social context.

4. Moving beyond the undergraduate curriculum

Academic public relations in Australia has constructed itself largely around the task of developing and delivering undergraduate (and more recently, postgraduate coursework) programs to produce trained technicians for the public relations workforce. This is a necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition for constructing a credible academic discipline. While the undergraduate curriculum will remain necessarily largely practice-based, more scholarly work is unlikely to emanate purely from the need to meet the technical demands of practice or from the type of theory building typical of the 'mainstream' US academy. Of course the precise range of research projects, service initiatives and subject areas for advanced teaching will emerge through local negotiation and build on particular local strengths and traditions.

However, an orientation beyond the undergraduate curriculum will be a necessary prerequisite for institutions and programs as they seek to hire new staff, forge interdisciplinary links, and introduce advanced study programs.

So what might a debate about the future of academic public relations along the lines of these suggestions mean for the role of the PRIA? We have attempted to problematise the way in which public relations academia in Australia has been constructed largely in terms of its relationship with practice, rather than looking to surrounding academic disciplines for intellectual sustenance. We have also drawn attention to the different models that implicitly underlie the academy's and the industry's understandings of professionalism, and which seem to account for the often strained relationship between the two. Although the proposition may appear paradoxical, it may be that by moving beyond its restrictive links with practice and becoming a more fully *academic* activity that public relations academia can contribute most to the process of professionalization that the PRIA is leading for the public relations industry in this country. At one level, the development of more sophisticated bodies of knowledge supporting advanced courses and research programs within the academy can assist the PRIA as it moves towards such crucial tasks of professionalization as distinguishing between professional and paraprofessional tasks and roles (Wilenski, 1964 cited in Baker, 2002) and accrediting the qualifications required for senior roles in the profession. At another level, an academy less preoccupied with defensive rhetoric and disciplinary demarcation may help the industry to come to a clearer picture of its current status in terms of its members' academic background, professional affiliation and breadth of responsibilities. Such knowledge can in turn assist groups such as the PRIA as the industry seeks to establish the functional coherence and public respect that will be the key to attaining professional status.

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